



Replacing Feminist Criticism

Author(s): Peggy Kamuf

Source: *Diacritics*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Cherchez la Femme Feminist Critique/Feminine Text, (Summer, 1982), pp. 42-47

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464678>

Accessed: 12/04/2008 12:31

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jhup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

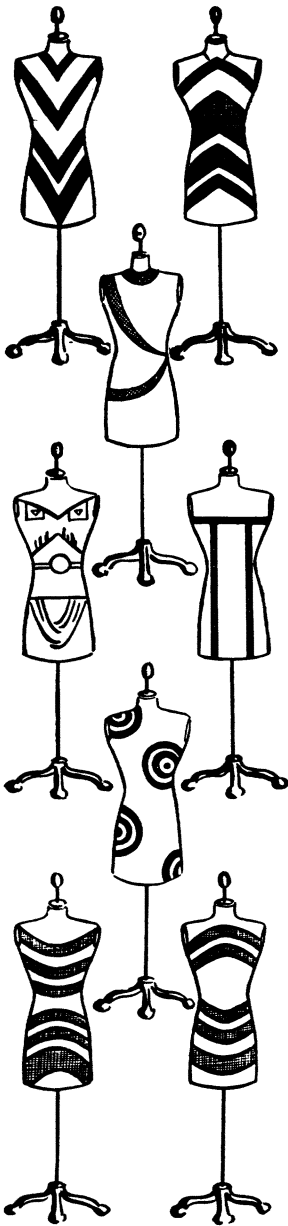
---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## DIALOGUE\*

# REPLACING FEMINIST CRITICISM

PEGGY KAMUF



What is the place of feminist critical practice in the institution, in particular, the university? Like many invitations to debate, this question seems destined to elicit answers in the form of paired oppositions. It can function, that is, to define potential relative positions as in formal argument. And for this reason, it is unlikely that this particular inquiry will ever lead beyond the limits of its own form and toward a response that is not already constrained by those limits. How can a question be posed here without reverting to the very terms of opposition which feminist theory has sought to undo?

In one sense, the remarks which follow attempt to unravel the logic of relative positions. If there is an answer to the question with which I began, it will not be found in some theoretical stand called for here but rather in the erosion of the very ground on which to take a stand. In another sense, by going over again, so as to erode, some old ground, I hope to leave open the possibility of reframing another question in the necessary terms of a feminist critique of institutions. This other question attempts to articulate the object with the place of critical activity.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent article which argues that feminist scholars cannot continue to study exclusively literature by women, the author suggests as one reason the increased pressures to streamline university curricula, thereby possibly endangering any activity which locates itself too singularly in the margins of a central academic tradition [Judith Spector, "Gender Studies: New Directions for Feminist Criticism," *College English*, April 1981, p. 376]. This view would seem to be part of a growing consensus among those involved in women's studies in general, that they must prepare to respond to an imminent re-centralization of the university. I refer you, for another example, to the debate about "mainstreaming" women's studies in *Women's Studies Quarterly* (Spring, Summer 1981).

In very general terms, such proposals to resituate feminist critical activity appear to rest on a number of unexamined political or theoretical judgments. For example, one finds there a surprising degree of assent to the notion that a recentralized university economy is the inevitable solution to an academic recession, even though this view may also entail subscribing to the principle – which has a certain currency right now – that whatever is good for business is good for the rest of social institutions. This uncritical acceptance of the principle of centrality would relocate at the center of the human enterprise a feminist

---

\*This article and the following one by Nancy K. Miller form an exchange between Kamuf and Miller which took place during a Symposium on Feminist Criticism held at Cornell University in October 1981.

<sup>1</sup>It is here that these remarks will reflect what they owe to Elaine Marks, director of the Women's Studies Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

criticism which has been redefined to reflect, as this same critic writes, "something more in line with what life is really like" [Spector, *ibid.*]. In this fashion, humanist metaphors of centrality work to coordinate a model of the efficient (i.e., cost-effective) institution with the notion of literature as mimetic representation. What I want to outline briefly is how a recentring of feminist theory can be seen to derive from a dominant pattern of ideological assumptions. I will be suggesting that by delimiting as the object of criticism literature by but also about, for and against women, this central form of feminist theory has already made certain assumptions about the place of critical activity within socio-political structures and their institutions. As one consequence, the attempt to redefine that object and relocate that activity may not be able to acknowledge how it risks getting misplaced.

The feminist critique of cultural institutions (including literature) has, in large part, proceeded from the evidence of woman's traditional exclusion and has therefore implied either that those institutions must be expanded to include what has been excluded (for example, by "mainstreaming" women's literature) or that they must be abandoned in favor of distinctly feminine-centered cultural models. These opposing strategies, in other words, both rest on the same analysis of phallogentrism's most readily evident feature – the order of women's exclusion – and proceed in practice to attempt to correct or reverse that feature at the same level at which it appears. What is thus left intact, perhaps, are the regions where the logic of exclusion disguises its operations more completely. One result may have been a feminist theory that accepts a determination of its place within the larger structure that anchors phallogentrism in culture. I take as an example of this limitation a feminist theory which accepts the place assigned to it by the disciplinary traditions of humanism; in this I am following, up to a certain point, a road which has already been mapped by Michel Foucault in his analysis of humanistic thought and its institutions. I will be looking for the possible extensions that could lead us beyond a too-narrowly defined field of feminist practice. To do so, however, may mean to invite a question about that "us" just offered, the pronoun which signals a common and thus, in a sense, singular subject – or object – of feminist theory.

There are two axes to Foucault's critique of what, in a French institutional context, are called the human sciences, or, less formally but perhaps more accurately, the sciences of man, which include both humanities and social sciences. The first axis concerns the object of humanistic inquiry – what it is that is studied – and the second concerns the aim – what it is that is gained (or simply produced) by that study. Briefly, this critique sets out from the commonplace notion that the human sciences take as their object "man," considered from the several angles of the conditions of his existence and his symbolic capacities. Yet, whereas traditional (i.e., humanistic) history of science tends to extend this model of inquiry back to the renaissance (and even before) as well as forward indefinitely into the future, Foucault's archaeology contends that the objectification of "man" – its appearance within the field of knowable objects – has a much more recent history, only since about the end of the eighteenth century in Europe. It is, then, as a rather novel epistemological invention that "man" – in his social, psychological, and linguistic manifestations – occupies the center stage of inquiry. This view is eccentric in the sense that it does not take up the humanistic assumption of a trans-historical and universal center of thought and, as such, it can theorize about what may lie outside the self-reflecting circle of that thought. In historical terms, for example, Foucault is able to posit both 1) that the human sciences and their object displaced another epistemological domain in which "man" stood at the limit of the represented field, organizing its procedures but not himself interrogated; and 2) that the modern epistemological construct may itself have been brought to the brink of another displacement that would efface "man" as either the hidden or the all-too-visible center of thought. On the last page of *Les Mots et les choses* [*The Order of Things*], one reads: "Man is an invention which the archaeology of our thought can easily show to be of recent date. And perhaps to be nearing its end" [my translation]. This process of ending has begun when thought moves beyond the limits of what has made it possible to think "man" as an autonomous whole, a circumscribable object, and into those regions surrounding the humanistic homeland, what one might call the no-man's land of the unconscious, the autonomous structures of language and the dynamics of history.

Although this particular evaluation of "man-centered" tradition has only been sketched here in its most general outline, it may be possible at least to conjecture along what lines it



could intersect with a reflection about an effective feminist practice of criticism. One might conclude, for example, that Foucault's careful excavation of the consolidated image of man on the face of modern Western society's knowledge of itself confirms the exclusion which is a hidden consequence of the identification of human with masculine. Isn't it precisely this exclusion which feminist scholars in all the disciplines of the human sciences have set out to expose and to rectify? Foucault's own conclusion, however, about the necessary displacement of a man-centered or (in less exclusive terms) human-centered epistemology might also give feminist scholars reason to pause and to wonder to what extent their efforts must remain caught as a reflection of the same form of nineteenth-century humanism from which we have inherited our pervasively androcentric modes of thought. In other words, if one can accept the major part of this analysis of how and why Western thought about human forms has taken the shape it has, then can one also conclude that modifying that shape to include its feminine contours will result in something fundamentally different? If, on the other hand, the empirical rectification of an empirical error can only result in yet another form of that error which is the possibility of a totalizing reference to an object—whether masculine, feminine or somehow both—then what is put in question here is perhaps the idea that feminist criticism can seek to define its object and still practice an effective critique of power structures. To put it yet another way: if feminist theory lets itself be guided by questions such as what is women's language, literature, style or experience from where does it get its faith in the form of these questions to get at truth, if not from the same central store that supplies humanism with its faith in the universal truth of man? And what if notions such as "getting-at-the-truth-of-the-object" represented a principal means by which the power of power structures are sustained and even extended?

This, in effect, is the question which Foucault has been asking in *Surveiller et punir* [*Discipline and Punish*] and *La Volonté de savoir* [*The Will to Knowledge*]. Reviewing the institutional development of the human sciences in the nineteenth century, he discerns behind the codified procedures for increasing knowledge about "man" in all his many aspects a growing technology of control and a proliferation of instruments of power. It is not so much that the human sciences do not produce knowledge, but rather that the codification of human experience and the investigation of human interaction, at the same time as they extend the empirical base of a given discipline, also open up new and previously uncharted regions for the control (or the *discipline* in another, less ivory-tower sense) of that experience and that interaction. This, together with the fact that the empirical human sciences necessarily operate with the concept of a norm rather than physical or a priori law, goes a long way towards explaining why these disciplines have historically been active partners in institutions which execute social norms by means of exclusion and internment— asylums, prisons, juvenile homes, hospitals and, not least, schools.

Once again, this is hardly an adequate summary of consistently intricate analyses, but it will suffice if it indicates what must interest feminist theory in those analyses, to wit: that power has pursued its aim of social control through proliferating institutions and that these institutions may be understood in many cases as the spatial realizations of the principles of humanistic knowledge. To put it more simply and with still less justice to Foucault's analyses: power and knowledge maintain highly ambiguous relations which get articulated in institutions.

Returning now to the question of the place of feminist criticism, which is also the question of its relation to an institution, one might at least hesitate before replying that the criticism should aim to rectify an omission from the institutional mainstream, producing a knowledge about women which has been excluded there by a masculine-dominated



ideology disguised as universal humanism. To expose and dismantle this disguise, in order to reach, as one feminist critic has described it, the *authentic* and essential human (as opposed to masculine) truths of literature [Marcia Holly, "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic" in *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, Donovan, ed. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), p. 42] may have an appeal as a theoretical program precisely because it replicates the familiar dream of humanism: a single center of truth to which all representation refers. In its articulation with and within an institution, what is to prevent such a program from taking the form which that articulation has historically assumed, in Foucault's estimate at least—a centrally defined space of power? If feminist theory can be content to propose cosmetic modifications on the face of humanism and its institutions, will it have done anything more than reproduce the structure of woman's exclusion in the same code which has been extended to include her?

This would seem to be one of the primary limitations of an assumption guiding much current feminist scholarship: an unshaken faith in the ultimate arrival at essential truth through the empirical method of accumulation of knowledge, knowledge about women. Consider for example the following passage from an anthology of essays on feminist literary theory in which the author proposes a revision of aesthetic models to include specifically feminine components:

*Through information gleaned from research in women's studies, I see a gradual falling together of truths and probabilities about women—their experience, their history, their wisdom, their culture—and this constellation will provide the basis for a feminine aesthetic. . . . Until we have had a chance to study women's art, history and culture more extensively, so as to begin to codify the patterns of consciousness delineated therein, I believe we will be unable to develop a more substantial feminine aesthetic.* [Josephine Donovan, "Afterword: Critical Re-vision," in Donovan, op. cit., pp. 77–78; emphasis added.]

What is striking about this passage, I think, is first the combined appeal to a specific "we" and to a certain method of defining who that "we" is. The "we," in other words, is constituted by a shared faith in its eventual consolidation at the end of an empirical process which will have codified its patterns of consciousness. Secondly, there is an implicit assumption in such programs that this knowledge about women can be produced in and of itself without seeking any support within those very structures of power which—or so it is implied—have prevented knowledge of the feminine in the past. Yet what is it about those structures which could have succeeded until now in excluding such knowledge if it is not a similar appeal to a "we" that has had a similar faith in its own eventual constitution as a delimited and totalizable object?

I earlier pointed to two contrary feminist strategies which share a humanist determination of woman's exclusion: on the one hand an expansion of institutions to include at their center what has been historically excluded; on the other hand, the installing of a counter-institution based on feminine-centered cultural models. By way of indicating another, yet-to-be-determined level of feminist critical practice, I am going to conclude by a strategic shift within the outlines of Foucault's archaeology. That analysis, you recall, ends with the end of

man as the central object of thought. What I have suggested above is that to the extent that feminist thought assumes the limits of humanism, it may be reproducing itself as but an extension of those limits and reinventing the institutional structures that it set out to dismantle. By stepping back now from the field which opposes a certain feminist centrality to Foucauldian eccentricity, it may be possible to imagine for a moment that when one or the other speaks of the end of man in Western thought, they are referring *essentially* to the same thing. What one may too easily overlook is the odd relation that can pertain between a discourse which, like most feminist discourse, situates itself at the center of the humanist enterprise and perhaps supplies a new impetus for the totalizing quest of that enterprise, and a discourse which, like Foucault's, situates itself frankly outside this center from where it may envision the approaching end of humanistic goals. What one and the other position may be said to share is the fixity of their situation in relation to an enclosing limit. Each discourse may be seeking to consolidate, by accumulating evidence, its right to speak on one side or the other of this limit. Thus whether one speaks from inside about an end of man and the beginning of *authentic* non-sexist humanism, or from outside about the end of humanism and the beginning of humanity's unthinkable other, it is finally the metaphor of inside and outside which dominates in one direction and the other. And it is at least questionable whether this opposition can ever be simply separated from the long and potent series of other oppositions which it organizes and commands, including inclusion and exclusion, the same and the different, self and other, "us" and "them."<sup>2</sup> That this list underwrites and is underwritten by gender opposition no doubt needs no further elaboration here. Having understood that, however, can a feminist practice on this cultural text stop there, leaving oppositional logic in place and in the place it has always occupied as the unquestioned ground and limit of thought?

One will, of course, continue to find oneself engaged on this ground by a political-social distribution of effects that shapes our institutions and that itself remains an oppressive application of oppositional determinations. Yet through the practice of literature one can understand how every meaning structure attempts to conceal its own contradiction, how logical oppositions rest on an aporia, on undecidability. Thus an engagement of patriarchal meaning structures which does not keep in view its own contradictory disengagement of that meaning can have little interest, finally, for feminist theory. That theory has more to learn from the shifts that affect a discourse on women and fiction which also situates itself in the institutional context. For example, the author of *A Room of One's Own* (the text of lectures read to two newly-founded women's colleges) can read the history of woman's silence as a patriarchal invention, can acknowledge many of the structures which must be overcome to undo that silence and yet can still write that "it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. . . . It is fatal for a woman . . . in any way to speak consciously as a woman" (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957, p. 108). In the more than fifty years since Virginia Woolf gave her lectures, the institutional organization of woman's silence has changed its face. What still remains, however, is that lever of contradiction with which to disengage meaning from patterns of sexual opposition.

That feminist thought has yet to decide where to situate itself on the map of the known world's divisions – either in a canonical mainstream with its centers of learning and culture, or in an outlying and unexplored region – may be the clue that such generic distinctions cannot contain it. To pursue this analogy still further (and at the risk of leaving even further behind or below the solid ground of a more quotidian tread), what feminist thought can and has put in question is the capacity of any map to represent more than a fiction of the world's contours. The line traced along the eastern edge of North America, for example, the line following the extreme border of an American context, for all its inlets and protrusions, its islands and peninsulas, still can only demarcate with the fiction of an arbitrarily traced line the point at which land moves out to sea and the ground slips from beneath us.

At these limits, traced and then retraced, always in view of a greater accuracy of representation, a feminist practice can have its greatest force if, at the same time as it shifts

---

<sup>2</sup>A critique of the project to put an end to "man" has been outlined by Jacques Derrida in "Les Fins de l'homme" ("The Ends of Man," *Marges de la philosophie* [Paris: Minuit, 1972]) where he writes: "What is difficult to think today is an end of man which is not organized by a dialectic of truth and negativity, an end of man which is not a teleology in the first person plural" (p. 144).

the sands of an historical sedimentation, it leaves its own undecidable margins of indeterminacy visible, readable on the surface of the newly-contoured landscape. That is, its own inevitable inaccuracy and lack of finality which must always show up wherever lines are drawn for the purpose of theoretical argument or for the more solid purpose of re-mapping an institution. It is tempting, of course, to assume that, once drawn, the lines of a representation can resist the eroding movement of a fluid element, and can keep the sea of fictions from wetting feet planted firmly in the ground. But that would be to deny a necessary plurivocality and plurilocality which even here, for example, press on the edge of these remarks. I am left, then, with room enough only to conclude from necessity: the necessity of replacing this discourse with another and of finding always another place from which to begin again.